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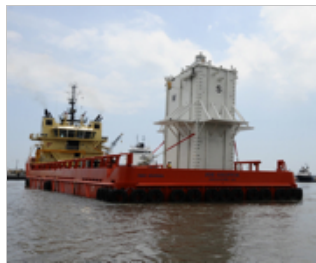


Daily Briefing: Thurs.

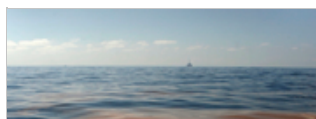
Thu, May 06 2010 at 10:10 AM EST

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THE DOME STRETCH: A four-story, 98-ton "containment dome" has arrived at the site of a gushing oil well in the Gulf of Mexico, and could be lowered down to the mile-deep leaks this afternoon. The box-shaped device (pictured, being carried on a barge) is designed to siphon up the leaking oil and pump it to barges on the surface, following many failed attempts to seal the leaks with remote-controlled robots. BP is also still drilling a new relief well to plug the oil geyser — which began erupting after a BP-owned oil rig exploded and sank two weeks ago — but that process will likely take months, leaving the dome as the best short-term solution available. But while such domes have been used to thwart oil leaks before, they've never been deployed at such great depths, and no one is sure whether this one will work. "I'm worried about every part," says BP's vice president for project execution. Engineers will have to inject warm water and methanol into the oil plume to prevent ice from forming, not to mention negotiating ocean currents and deep-sea pressure, and there's always the danger that the mixture of oil, gas and water could react explosively upon reaching the surface. When asked about the dome's likelihood of success, another BP VP declined to speculate: "This has never been done before," he says. "Typically you would put odds on something that has been done before." Elsewhere, crews conducted controlled burns of the surface oil slick Wednesday as the weather took a turn for the better, while U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar toured the Breton National Wildlife Refuge off [Louisiana](#), where he told reporters that the stakes are high for BP as oil continues to spread. "The future, the life of their company, hangs right now in indecision," Salazar said, "because they haven't yet figured out the answer to this problem." (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [CNN](#), [New York Times](#), [MSNBC](#))



DISPERSE AND CONQUER: Concern continues to grow today about chemical dispersants that BP is spraying onto the Gulf [oil spill](#), as the chemical barrage exceeds any previous cleanup efforts in



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history. More than 166,000 gallons of dispersants have already been used, and are credited with keeping the oil slick from reaching the mainland, where it could devastate coastal wildlife. They help the vast rafts of black goo deteriorate into smaller chunks, which then sink and can be more easily digested by oil-eating bacteria. But the chemicals are toxic — perhaps even more so than the oil they're breaking up — and the company that makes them keeps some ingredients secret, calling them proprietary information. "It's like any other product," says a senior manager at the Nalco Company, which makes Corexit dispersants. "We developed them and we're protecting our trade secret." Terry Hazen, a microbial ecologist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, warns that the dispersants could be making the oil spill even worse: "It is important to remember that oil is a biological product and can be degraded by microbes," he says. "Some of the detergents that are typically used to clean up spill sites are more toxic than the oil itself, in which case it would be better to leave the site alone and allow microbes to do what they do best." Hazen recommends using sorbents instead, but Wired reports that another type of dispersant known as Dispersit is less toxic and more effective than Corexit, although it's not being used by BP. Not only did an [EPA](#) study find that Corexit was 54.7 percent effective at breaking down Gulf crude oil, while Dispersit's success rate was 100 percent, but it found that Corexit was three times more lethal to silverfish and twice as deadly to shrimp. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [e! Science News](#), [Wired](#))



THE FINAL COUNTDOWN: Space shuttle Atlantis will take its final flight into space next week, top NASA officials decided Wednesday. Liftoff is scheduled for 2:20 p.m. on May 14, when Atlantis will carry six astronauts and a load of supplies up to the International Space Station. The 12-day mission will include bringing a Russian-built module to install on the station as well as three spacewalks, in which astronauts will change batteries on exterior equipment and add on a new antenna. NASA is retiring its fleet of three space shuttles at the end of the year, and following Atlantis' last fling, only two — Discovery and Endeavor — will remain. Atlantis won't be dismantled or even decommissioned just yet, however; NASA is preparing the retired shuttle for a potential rescue mission to back up its very last shuttle flight, Endeavor, which will take off in November at the earliest. (Discovery is slated to make its final flight in September.) NASA launch director Mike Leinbach says the looming retirement isn't a distraction for shuttle workers. "They know the end is coming and they're making their plans," he said at a news conference Wednesday. "We've gotten past the denial stage of change, and we're into the exploration and the acceptance [of] change." President Obama has canceled NASA's shuttle program in his 2011 federal budget, focusing the agency's efforts instead on landing on an asteroid by 2025 and on Mars by 2035. (Sources: [AP](#), [Space.com](#))



CHINESE TORNADO: At least 29 people have died in southwestern China after a severe storm swept through the Chongqing municipality early Thursday morning, bringing heavy rains, hail, gale-force winds and even a tornado, which is much less common in Asia than in North America. China's Ministry of Civil Affairs reports that nearly 200 people were injured and 70,000 were displaced from their homes by the


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storm, which also destroyed some 1,000 houses and damaged another 10,000. In the county of Dianjiang, damage is estimated at more than 120 million yuan, or \$17.6 million. The rare tornado struck at about 2 a.m. on Thursday, with winds reaching up to 70 mph and torrential rains persisting for 24 hours in some places. (Sources: [AP](#), [BBC News](#))

UNDER PRESSURE: Residents in the ancient Mayan city of Palenque may not have been taking hot showers or power-washing their temples, but a team of Penn State researchers has determined that they did build the earliest known pressurized water system in the Americas. "Water pressure systems were previously thought to have entered the New World with the arrival of the Spanish," the researchers report in a recent issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Science*. "Yet archaeological data, seasonal climate conditions, geomorphic setting and simple hydraulic theory clearly show that the Maya of Palenque ... had empirical knowledge of closed-channel water pressure predating the arrival of Europeans." Palenque was first occupied around the year 100, but expanded during the Classic Maya period between 250 and 600 before it was finally abandoned around 800. Archaeologists have long known that the Maya and other Native Americans developed aqueducts for transporting water, but this is the first evidence that they could also pressurize their water supplies. "Under natural conditions it would have been difficult for the Maya to see examples of water pressure in their world," says one of the researchers. "They were apparently using engineering without knowing the tools around it. This does look like a feature that controls nature." (Source: [ScienceDaily](#))



— [Russell McLendon](#)

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Photo (BP containment dome): ZUMA Press

Photo (dispersed oil off Louisiana coast): ZUMA Press

Photo (space shuttle Atlantis): ZUMA Press

Photo (tornado damage in Dianjiang county, China): ZUMA Press

Photo (El Palacio, Palenque, Mexico): Lonely Planet Images

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very informative

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